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SUBJECT: MEDIA WRAP-UP: IRAQ AND U.S. MID-TERM ELECTIONS, NATO'S
CALL FOR MORE TROOPS IN AFGHANISTAN, EUROPE'S APPROACH TO MUSLIM
HEAD SCARF. NOVEMBER 3, 2006.

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Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Speculation about the upcoming U.S. mid-term elections and the impact of the war in Iraq elicited widespread conjecture about the prospects for a new U.S. strategy for Iraq. President Talabani's visit to Paris prompted additional discussion of the need for international support for his country's reconstruction. Concerns about the loss of ground in Afghanistan and the need for greater international commitment led right-of-center Le Figaro to warn against abandoning NATO to an "impossible mission." The UK controversy over the banning of the Muslim scarf in public received some coverage in light of France's own stance on the issue. The story returned to the forefront in the media as a European-wide issue, with French presidential hopeful Philippe de Villiers declaring himself in favor of banning the scarf from all public places. End Summary.

IRAQ: MIDTERM ELECTIONS, TALABANI MEETS CHIRAC

¶2. (SBU) For left-wing Liberation the coming midterm elections have become an "American Battle" in which, despite solid economic growth, "the war in Iraq will play into the hands of the Democrats." Even if left-wing Liberation acknowledged that Americans "were not questioning the use of force in Iraq," it concluded they were "calling into question the lack of results." The daily argued that "never since Vietnam have international affairs so influenced American elections." Right-of-center Le Figaro wondered whether the elections would serve as "a referendum" on the Bush Administration's Iraq policy, but noted that the Democrats were "divided on a pullout calendar." Despite the divisions inside the Democratic Party, right-of-center Le Figaro concluded the Republicans "could be facing a Congressional upset." Popular right-of-center Le Parisien noted President Bush's less "optimistic" stance during his recent press conference when he spoke of the "escalation of violence in Baghdad." But right-of-center Le Figaro described the U.S. President as "back on the war path, as if he were on the ballot himself: he loosened his tie and turned up his sleeves during a marathon visit of seven states."

¶3. (SBU) Iraq's President Talabani's visit to Paris had some commentators arguing that "the time had come to turn a new page in the Franco-Iraqi relationship." Popular right-of-center Le Parisien

reported that Talabani was in Paris to "ask France to play a greater role in Iraq's reconstruction." But regional press editorialist Jacques Camus cast doubt about "what President Chirac could promise, other than to invite Europe to contribute diplomatically and economically in the establishment of democracy in Iraq." Right-of-center Le Figaro headlined its interview of the Iraqi President: "Paris Must Support Iraq," and highlighted Talabani's explanation that "negotiations" were under way "to integrate opposition groups in the framework of a national reconciliation." Georges Malbrunot's long, thoughtful analytic piece for right-of-center Le Figaro concluded that "a well-contained federalism was a pre-condition for Iraq's survival. Only then can the U.S. consider a gradual pullout."

AFGHANISTAN--SUPPORT FOR NATO

¶4. (SBU) As France, according to Catholic La Croix, begins preparing for its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the paper interviewed NATO Commander General James Jones. Under headlines saying, "SACEUR wants 'visible results' in the battle against drugs, and on security and judicial reforms," Jones argued that "the ultimate solution [for Afghanistan] is not a military solution." Later in the week, right-of-center Le Figaro headlined: "Afghanistan Needs More Troops" as it reported British General David Richards's appeal in the British media. Pierre Rousselin recalled in an editorial in right-of-center Le Figaro that "the war in Afghanistan, which started out under the best possible auspices, was not going well." Rousselin warned against a return of the Taliban, "who are better armed and organized thanks to Jihadists coming from Iraq." Rousselin appealed to the international community to "help NATO convince the local population it was its best option for salvation." Rousselin concluded that "NATO's first operation outside its traditional North Atlantic zone must not be allowed to become a mission impossible."

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EUROPE'S STANCE ON MUSLIM SCARF--A BAN?

¶5. (SBU) The French media showed particular interest in the recent UK debate over the banning of the Muslim scarf in public places. Left-of-center Le Monde titled its analysis "British Multiculturalism" and commented somewhat tongue-in-cheek that "gone are the days when the UK looked upon France's controversy over the banning of the Muslim scarf in public schools with a grain of superiority and contempt." Jean-Pierre Langellier scoffed at the British tradition of "live and let live" and concluded that Blair's government had become aware that Islamic fundamentalism in the UK was "the bitter fruit of ethnic/religious separatism." The weekly magazine Marianne speculated on whether "British-style integration was coming to an end." More broadly, the media looked at the controversy as a sign of a confrontation with Muslim communities inside Europe and the failure of multiculturalism as a result of a "too broad acceptance" of customs based on religion and ethnicity.

¶6. (SBU) In his weekly wrap-up column in right-of-center Le Figaro, Ivan Rioufol described the situation in France as "A Ticking Time Bomb, ... where the wearing of the Muslim scarf in the streets has never been as widespread since it was banned from public schools." On November 2, right-of-center Le Figaro interviewed French Presidential hopeful Philippe de Villiers (Mouvement pour la France Party President) who stated he favored banning the wearing of Muslim scarves in public places, arguing that the scarf was an "obstacle" to Muslim integration. He portrayed himself as the last "bastion" of protection for the Republic against 'communautarism.' De Villiers argued that Islamic fundamentalism "threatened France's secularism" and that the laws of the Republic dictated that "Islam adapt to France" not the other way around.
STAPLETON